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# The Development of Social Interactions and Identity Within an Adult Dating, Sex and Swingers Virtual Community: A Case Study of Adult Friend Finder

Jessica Harding

The Internet has changed how human beings interact, communicate and make social connections, which opens up our social experiences from limited, local, physical connections to global, instantaneous, and virtual ones. People are creating online virtual lives, social connections and identities that have become important aspects of their "real" lives. Online virtual communities and networks are springing up everywhere with the advent of new chat websites geared to creating specific online meeting places for people of like mind to interact, "the Internet is a microcosm of the world in which we live, (Delmonico and Miller)." One of the leaders in this movement is adult online websites that provide all inclusive memberships and allow patrons to look at online personal ads. These include member profiles, photos (explicit and non-explicit) of actual members, recorded video messages, live cams with audio, group chat rooms and private instant messaging. While interaction between members is for the most part virtual, people are also able to meet and make personal and social connections in the real world.

The Internet and adult websites are providing a medium for change that has a very real impact on human relationships and how they are cultivated and defined. The topic of adult websites and the development of new types social interactions and personal identity within an electronic community are important to study because new technologies are rapidly changing the way human beings connect, interact and communicate, "... It has completely changed the nature of interpersonal relationships, (Delmonico and Miller 262)."

In the past decade, it has become more acceptable to meet a love interest online. Before the popularity and wide spread use of the Internet, people would seem shocked, amazed and sometimes appalled about hearing about this unconventional way of dating and connecting. Nowadays, many people are meeting their future husbands and wives in chat rooms and dating websites like Match.com and Eharmony.com.

Virtual relationships have impacted many lives both negatively and positively, "Internet is perceived as a positive or negative force (Delmonico and Miller 262)." On the positive side, through online feedback and interaction with people that share their interests, some users have even gained higher self-esteem and learned to become more sociable. However, some users, often newcomers to the Internet, have become victims of fraud, being taken advantage of by virtual misrepresentations or online money scams that target the lonely and unaware.

The Internet also provides users with new and affordable, anonymous outlets to express sexuality, "the Internet is a world without boundaries, a free world that because of its special features-accessibility, ease of use and low cost-allows relational possibilities, romantic relationships and access to all kinds of sexual pursuits, (Carvalhiera and Gomes 346)." Adult websites make it easy to access various types of erotica and pornography, as well as, new ways of finding mates. It is becoming clearer that human sexuality and identity is being impacted by the World Wide Web's influence as people discover and become more involved with adult websites, and participation in online sexual activities.

The Internet, instant messaging, chat rooms, and specialty websites that cater to every personal preference and niche are rapidly changing how human beings are connecting and establishing relationships. I decided to base a case study on a website called Adult Friend Finder (AFF), which is an online community that is specifically geared toward sex, adult dating, finding sex partners and swinging couples. I wanted to examine the web site itself and research the personal and social impact of AFF has had on a sample population of its members. My research was an inductive study that applied methods of fieldwork, participant observation, ethnographic research, unobtrusive observation and interviewing informants to achieve my objective.

*Cyberspace Relationship Impact:* Andy Miah's article, "Virtually Nothing: Re-Evaluating the Significance of Cyberspace," he critically analyzes and argues that cyberspace is propelling society into postmodernism, but that the virtual world is not a "technopia" that provides freedom from cultural norms and prejudices of society. He also makes the argument that virtual space challenges identity construction rather than a vehicle for ultimate freedom.

Miah's study is a content analysis and critique of peer reviewed works that lean toward what he refers to as "cyber-libertarian" position that believes the Internet is a mechanism for social liberation. In his analysis, Miah establishes how the Internet challenges notions of time, space, location and sexuality because it is making a significant influence and impact on human relationships, especially identity. However, while this evolution of human identity and relationships is taking place, Miah contends that cyberspace serves to bind and cage us by impacting our leisure, that contrary to cyber-libertarians who believed that virtual reality experiences are without meaning.



Miah believes that the Internet is impacting and enhancing human relationships. Miah argues that meaningful relationships are emerging from electronic contact with people that would have been inaccessible in the past and that these relationships are transcending space, time, geography and notions of morality. Miah's conclusions tie in with my own theory that adult online websites are facilitating this new way of creating and establishing relationships and altering and enhancing social connections and individual identity.

In *Relationship Impact from Internet Sexual Activity*, Parker and Wampler (2003) studied the impact on relationships between couples because of online sexual activity. They set out to measure the potential impact of different types of online sexual activity by giving participant several scenarios involving online sexual activity. The participants had to rate the level each scenario based upon emotional and sexual involvement, amount of distraction from the primary relationship, and whether or not the activity should be considered a full affair (417).

Their sample consisted of university undergraduate students attending Southwestern University that was recruited from science and health classes; measuring demographics such as age, gender and religion (418).

Their results yielded that participants felt that some online sexual behaviors were worse than others that could potentially impact a relationship. Parker and Wampler presented four aspects of behavior as emotional involvement, sexual involvement, distractibility, and affairs. The participants rated adult websites and chat rooms with and without interactions and becoming a member of an adult site to be less of an impact on a relationship than Internet sex, phone sex and physical sexual interaction that were seen by the participants as problematic and impactful. They found that online sexual activity to be less of an affair than actual physical sex, but it is closer to an affair than not (425). They also concluded and proved their prediction that more women than men found that Internet sexual activities to be much more serious than did the men, but the study also suggested that there are less emotional ties in Internet sexual activities (425).

## **Methodology**

My research objectives were to attempt to answer a series of questions. First, I wanted to determine how social relationships are being formed in virtual adult online communities and if these connections are personally impacting individual members and if so how? Secondly, I wanted to examine the level and frequency of individual's social interaction prior to becoming members on the website and how it has changed since they become members. More specifically, I wanted to know if the friendships and relationships members are creating online are lasting ones and how they categorize these relationships in their lives. Finally, I wanted to also examine if their personal relationship goals and ideas of sexuality, as well as, member's level of self-discovery, self esteem and identity have changed or not since they have become members of the website.

### *Instrument*

The instrument consisted of a series of 86 interview questions that was delivered to the informant via Instant Messaging (IM) or in person. The interview questions focused on social relationships developed on AFF and how the informant categorizes them, level of personal impact, including identity, sexuality and overall self-esteem and body image. Questions regarding the subject's relationship history prior to AFF were also asked to compare impact before and after their involvement AFF is also included.

### *Procedure*

To achieve my research objectives I immersed myself into the AFF culture by creating a profile and interacting with members via IM, chat rooms and email to establish myself as a recognizable, regular member.

I paid for the highest level of membership to be able to view the site in total, since lower level memberships had limited access to the website. The research profile was designed to be an accurate representation of my true physical description of myself.

My fieldwork was conducted by entering into two different AFF regional chat rooms, New England and NYC. Chat rooms were accessed during different times of the night and day in order to observe unobtrusively how the participants interacted within the site. Once I was able to establish myself as a regular fixture in the chat rooms, later I started to interact in conversations with participants. Through participant observation for few weeks prior to the actual interviews, I was able to establish trust and rapport that eventually enabled me to collect a few volunteers for the study using a snowball method.



### *Sample*

The sample population for this study was 18 male members from the web site. Interviewees' ages ranged in-between 22 to 60; all white males with the exception of 1 Hispanic, all but three were straight (1 bisexual and 2 bi-curious), the majority being in their mid-30s to mid-40s. Most of the interviewees resided in the North Eastern United States Tri-state area, but three of the men were international members that were from Italy, France and Mexico. This sample is highly representative of the majority of the population of the AFF website.

All of the males I interviewed contacted me first to volunteer for the study after reading my blog, or saw me in a chat room while I was talking to members about the study. However, the men's interests were not in the actual study itself, but rather their goal was to interact and talk with a female from the site regardless of her motivation for being on the site.

## **Findings**

### *Website*

Unobtrusive observation was used during the first part of the study to get an overall view of the website itself. Adult Friend Finder promotes itself as, "The World's Largest Sex and Swingers Personals Community." The home page has provocative images of a perfectly shaped models (mostly scantily clad females) and pictures of supposed local members under the heading "Meet People Looking for Sex" in your area. The site has over twenty-three million members and growing larger daily. It boasts that approximately one hundred-fifty thousand members are on the site at any given time. They advertise the benefits of membership as being able to:

Indulge yourself and find partners for hot Sexual Encounters and Adult Dating!  
Anonymously email, chat and instant message with other sexually liberated members!  
Explore the erotic lifestyle of millions of people through their Nude Photos and thousands of Sexy Webcam Videos.

AFF in essence offers an alternative to other regular dating and relationship building websites for users. Members are attracted to the site because it offers the ability to openly display one's sexuality and sexual interests within a group of like-minded individuals who ultimately joined the site for similar reasons.

### *Membership*

The level of membership determines what access a member would have to certain website features. The highest-level membership is "Gold," which costs about \$30 for a monthly membership. Gold membership allows a member access all website features, including access to full profiles (physical characteristics and preferences, compatibility scoring), blogs, cams and have the ability to view larger photos. "Silver" members pay about \$20 per month to enjoy limited benefits like partial access to profiles, blogs and regular size pictures. The lowest membership is "Standard" have very limited access to profiles, are able to view very small thumbnail pictures, have limited capability to send email or view live cams and blogs, and have very limited access to members of higher membership status. In fact, members of Gold or Silver membership can elect to pay \$20 more monthly for an extra feature that allows standard members can contact them.

Of the men interviewed within this online community, half of them paid for Gold level memberships and of those men, half of them had income levels of \$50,000-100,000 U.S.D. annually. As stated above in the previous section, there is a hierarchy of membership level access within the site, which is dictated by economics, adult oriented web sites account for the majority of Internet commerce. In 1998 users spent \$970 million on adult related sites, (Parker and Wampler 415)." The people who can afford it have the most access generally. However, a couple of the men interviewed made over \$100,000 were Standard members and a few of the Gold memberships were held by men who made \$0-20,000.

### *Population and Gender Imbalance*

In general AFF members are varied across the board and represent every nationality, country, race, creed and religion, sexual orientation and gender roles, all there to find and meet sexual and romantic partners. However, the majority of the AFF population is predominantly single or divorced, heterosexual, white males in their mid-thirties to mid-forties. The male volunteers I interviewed were a very good sample representation of this population.

There is a major imbalance in the male to female distribution of gender on the site. Males seem to outnumber females about three to one. Females are a rare commodity on the site and for every one email a male will receive, a female will receive at



least five, but it is probably closer to 10 times the amount as men. The women also seem to hold the power on the site as they can pick and choose from the plethora of males that inhabit AFF, all competing with each other to get noticed. Just like in Nature, males competing for females often vie for attention with displays. On AFF, the male display is often varied, yet confined to the electronic medium. It is often represented by the obvious physical flaunting of pictures of their male sex organs. But others choose to show the female their intellectual prowess by sending emails that will often talk about what sets them apart from others, either expressing a simple introduction to long, imaginative erotic stories penned by their own hands. Yet others feel it is better to be more honest and direct, stating their true desires and send emails that simply say things like, "Let's meet," to "Let's fuck."

### *Profiles and Emailing*

A profile is not only a creation of an online identity/persona, but on AFF it is a personal marketing campaign to sell one's self to the object of one's desire, as Xavier puts it, "AFF is only about marketing, if you want to hit you have to give the women what they're expecting." Therefore, creating a profile is relatively simple. Nearly anything goes on a profile. Profiles consist of several elements that are designed to give as clear a view of the person's online persona as possible. Elements of a profile consist first of a catchy handle or user ID, such as "Hungtongueyman," "Pinkpushr69," or "Iwant2tasteU2" (these handles have been changed and every effort made to protect the identity of site members, any similarity to a member's actual handle is purely coincidental). User IDs often describe a person's intent on the site, humor, cleverness or interests of the person in real life.

Second, a clever introduction title is the next important profile element as it advertises the profile to the browser searching through thousands of profiles. If a member does not have a picture up, this is the best way of getting noticed amongst the many. Next, an introduction paragraph is essential as it is where the user describes his/her personality, physical description, their preferences, what they are looking for in terms of "relationship goals," and a description of their "ideal person." If a member is not able to readily think of a clever introduction, a user can elect to use a pre-made introduction written for members by AFF, for example:

I'm your typical wild child, the epicenter of any good party. Hey there! I'm an easygoing, nonjudgmental guy who's looking for new things to try out. I've always been good at getting a conversation started and keeping it interesting. I like to meet new playmates for uncomplicated fun. I look forward to putting a smile on your face. If you contact me please include a face pic. Feel free to drop me a line and let's get the party started!

There are several of these scripted introductions that are gender specific, but they tend to be used more by men than women on the site.

The research profile I created on the site was my only insight to how females are contacted by the male members of AFF. Within the few hours that my profile was approved for viewing on AFF, I received over 200 views (visits to my profile), received about 31 emails, and 20 invitations to member networks. Thirty of the emails were from interested men and one from a couple looking for a bisexual female to join them (initiated by the male of the couple). The bulk of the emails were cordial and flattering, but very direct in their intent. The majority of the emails consisted of basic introductions, invitations to chat and "get to know each other better," as well as directly stating their sexual desires.

I compared this data with data I collected from the interviewees and the majority of men in the study (with the exception of a handful), all claimed that they received very little email, in fact the majority reported receiving zero to three emails on average weekly. Very few of the emails received were ever initiated first by female members; instead they were often replies to emails that the men had already sent. Interviewees reported that the only emails that were initiated by "females" were often solicitations from fake profiles that had a link to another pay website. Some of the men who were new to the site felt that perhaps their emails were not getting through due to technical difficulties and faulty email service on the site, Raul commented, "I prefer to think that the AFF is a bad webpage that lost all information."

### *Pictures*

Pictures say a thousand words on user profiles and are very often the first and only thing that some browsers need to make contact with someone of interest. Up to twenty pictures can be uploaded to profiles. The majority of pictures that are shown are normally of members in the nude, who are often engaged in sexual acts or displaying the genital region specifically. Only a small percentage of members display pictures of their faces and if they do they are either wearing sunglasses, the picture is out



of focus or taken from afar. All of this is in an effort to not only advertise one's "assets," but also to preserve anonymity.

The majority of interviewees liked and were turned on by the nude pictures displayed by other members, however, some felt that close-ups of male and female genitals were not nearly as attractive as pictures that displayed faces, clothed bodies or full-body nudes taken from a distance, an online interviewee reported, "I like a good pair of boobs, but I like face pics better . . . nice to know that the pic matches the description." Some of the men who are "veterans" on the website felt the genital pictures of male members were juvenile and displayed a lack of understanding of what females are attracted to, Ryan said of this phenomenon, "Males have this idea that females are stimulated to the same extent by the male nude body as men are with the female body, but I have come to learn that that's often not the case."

Pictures are important to profiles because they to connect the disincorporate online personas with and the actual physical reality of the person. In essence, pictures serve an important function of filling in the blank that is left by the nature of online communication.

### *In-Person Interviews*

The second part of the study was to conduct interviews of AFF members online and in-person. Of the 18 male participants in the study, 6 of the interviews were conducted in person at various local public places (usually a restaurant, book store or coffee shop).

The advantage of the in-person interview was that I was able to observe the subjects' body language, comfort and validity level they had in response to my questions. I was able to tell if there were discrepancies in how they appeared in-person, versus the descriptions on their profiles. I was able to observe their level of sociability, especially interacting with a member of the opposite sex.

I observed that every in-person interviewees often seemed nervous and on their "best" behavior upon meeting and greeting the interviewer. They tended to display more formal, more focused demeanors and were less likely to use profanity and "familiar" language at the beginning of the interview. As the interview progressed, the interviewees eventually became more comfortable in demeanor and language. Every one of the men interviewed in-person, at some point during the interview, would display subtle to very obvious flirtatious behavior toward the interviewer. I found all of the men interviewed in-person to be very open and honest for the most part. I interpret this to be due to the fact that it was harder to withhold or lie in-person, and also to the fact that they felt assured that they would remain anonymous. The majority of the men interviewed in-person accurately described themselves on their profiles and looked like the pictures they displayed.

There was only one case in person where I noted very obvious discrepancies between the interviewees profile and how he looked in person. This interviewee I will refer to as "Adam" from here on out. Adam's profile showed a professional looking picture taken of a very well groomed, handsome man with "model looks" in a tuxedo as if he was part of a wedding party. He described himself on his profile as being over six feet tall, dark hair and blue eyes. Although Adam in-person was not abnormal at all in appearance and was nice looking by most western beauty standards, he was certainly not the man in the photo described above. He was approximately five feet eight inches and was wearing blue-eyed contact lenses that masked his natural brown eyes. The demeanor he displayed suggested that he was an introvert. He was capable of social interaction once he warmed up to the situation.

When I asked him if he had ever lied on his profile he admitted that his main profile picture was inaccurate stating that he was concerned about being recognized and did not want to take that chance, "anonymity can provide security and be a protector and a liberator, because it makes it easier for the individual to express his or her interests and desires, (Carvalhiera and Gomes 346)." However, the extra pictures displayed on his profile of him naked (face not shown) and performing different sex acts with couples and individuals he said were real pictures of him. He also offered another discrepancy found on his profile which stated that he did not use recreational drugs on his profile, but admitted in the interview to smoking marijuana and using sex enhancement drugs like "poppers." Other members refer to using this substance, Ron explained to me that "poppers" are used for sexual performance enhancement, "it is a drug available over the counter at most sex shops often sold under several different names as "incense" or "tape-head cleaner," that's how they get away with it," he said.

Overall, the in-person interviews were the most optimal way of conducting this research, as it was important to see how the Internet persona translates into real life. To be able to read subtle cues from body language and recognize discrepancies like those found with Adam gave me a better understanding of how complex the dynamics are as the virtual persona transmogrifies into the real life person.



### *Online-IM Interviews*

The majority of the interviews were conducted via IM, usually on an offsite messaging system such as Yahoo or AOL. I would record these interviews by copying and pasting text from the IM window where the actual interview took place and then paste the text into a word processing document. Only one interview was conducted utilizing AFF's IM system, which proved to be quite difficult and not as stable as the previously stated IM systems. It was harder to copy and paste from the IM window to a Word document.

The only advantage of the IM interview was that it was the most convenient and the interview could be conducted at any time during the day, from anywhere there was Internet access. Most of the men in the study that were interviewed via IM were usually at their jobs during the interview using their company computers, some of the men worked from home and the rest were on the road on laptop computers.

There were only two instances where web cams were utilized during interviews. Both proved to be more of a distraction than help during the interview. There were technical difficulties where the cam would freeze or would completely stop the transition of messages altogether to the point where it was necessary to reboot the IM program and start the interview where we left off. Also, the men often considered being on their webcams titillating and acted sexually suggestive or even blatantly displaying their nakedness from the waist down, exposing their genitalia during the interview.

One such case was that of "Xavier" who resided in Paris, France and claimed to be at work insisted that the interview be conducted via Webcams, "please eye to eye." He turned his webcam on immediately and asked if I would turn mine on as well, "can I see u?" When I turned on my webcam and proceeded to start the interview he became overtly flirtatious, referring to me as "Mona Lisa." While his demeanor was very much present, he became distracted and unfocused during the questioning at times. Later in the interview when I asked him about his fantasies he said "ur my fantasy," and asked me to smile. Although I never reacted to his flirtatious and sexual comments towards me, after the interview, as I thanked him for his participation and was saying my goodbyes, he panned his cam towards his crotch area and said, "This is what I was doing during our talk," and exposed himself to me.

Although his behavior seemed crude, indiscreet and disrespectful, it is indicative of the nature of the website and the connotations connected with webcams as being used predominantly as sexual devices for mutual masturbation, exhibition and voyeurism during cybersex, "the objective is sexual arousal and some participants use a web camera, (Carvalhiera et al. 347)." His behavior also suggested that he was comfortable in his own surroundings, secure in his feeling of anonymity and his physical locale being so distant from the interviewer's location that his fear of identity exposure was very minimal.

### *Sexual Liberation, Identity, Anonymity*

The men I interviewed seemed to be of the consensus that being on the site has helped them to express their true sexuality. They no longer fear that their sexual preferences and interests in sex are somehow abnormal. For these men, the theme of the site automatically removes the stigma of talking about, wanting and seeking out sex, "anonymity provides not only protection by abolishing barriers that come up in face-to-face relationships but also liberation by allowing the expression of desires and fantasies that could not otherwise be experienced. Anonymity allows many individuals to "take off their masks," (Carvalhiera and Gomes 356)." What used to be only talked about in locker rooms or behind closed doors is now not only out in the open but also celebrated and encouraged on the web site. The men believe AFF to be a haven of like-minded individuals "real people" who are openly expressing and exploring their sexuality, Ryan describes what attracted him to the website:

The opportunity to meet sexual, sexually active people and individuals that were actually interested in getting together to explore sexuality. . . . Yes it was a revelation to me when I found it. And when I did it was the beginning of the end of my marriage—to find people out there that were thinking like I was.

The idea of having a place to express and explore one's sexuality has made an impact on some of the men's lives and identity. They report often feeling more confident in expressing their sexual preferences, more comfortable in their sexuality and more comfortable socially, especially in approaching and interacting with opposite sex.

Ryan's case is quite unique out of all the members that were interviewed in that he is by far longest member of the site, having been on the site off and on for nine years. It made quite an impact not only on his lifestyle but identity as well. He told me in his interview when I asked him if being on the website has affected how he sees himself he answered:



Yes it has. Before I went on AFF I was never told I was handsome, never told I was good-looking. AFF has been an incredible boost. I had always considered myself to be an average male and just recently through a meeting with someone on AFF I was told I was well endowed and also I have seen the pictures of other men and what they carry and I think I am ok. I am now confident in intimate situations. Yes definitely has changed how I see myself.

When I asked Jim if the site has affected how he saw himself, if AFF had changed his feeling about himself and how he felt about himself currently he answered, "yes, it's been a positive thing. . . yes, definitely made me more confident and more comfortable in my own skin. . . . Right now in my life I am in a good place—haven't always been, but am now."

While most of the men reported that AFF had no real impact on their self-esteem or body image, the majority of men interviewed felt liberated and free to express their sexuality because of the site. The men also felt that the women on AFF are just as sexually liberated as the men on the site, Adam talked about his thoughts on the women of AFF, "women [on AFF] seem more aggressive, more amorous. I think it [AFF] empowers them." Overall, most of the men reported that they felt more confident, more comfortable with themselves, more social and more secure in their identity since becoming members. The anonymity of AFF allows members to improve their social skills and enables them to receive feedback from the opposite sex that they would not necessarily receive in real life.

#### *De-Ritualized Romance and Relationships*

Members feel comfortable in their anonymity and are liberated from social constraints of traditional dating and mating rituals that require people to get to know each other for longer periods of time to establish deep emotional connections before a physical, sexual connection can take place. In the virtual world of AFF, all of those constraints are no longer a barrier and members can skip all of the "red tape," Ron contributes, "It's the opposite of regular dating, first you have sex and then you have the small talk." Ron uses AFF to not just meet sexual partners, but also uses it as his primary means of dating, it is his hope that he finds a woman to be within a long term relationship that shares his drive, interest in sex and swinging. He talked about his AFF dating experience, "usually we have dinner and drinks; if we hit it off we find a motel and hopefully we'll be compatible."

For Xavier, he states that he only uses the site when he's single and mostly to view women live on web cam masturbating, when I asked him what his relationship goal is on the site he said, "I cannot associate this site [AFF] and love. . . well a physical relationship doesn't have to be about love. . . it is better though, the best thing in life is to make love to a woman you love and that loves you too." Xavier felt that AFF was his personal outlet for instant sexual gratification and "no strings attached" short-term sex partners, not a way of meeting a woman for a long term, romantic relationship. Xavier has met approximately six women from the site all of which he had sex with. He describes a date he met on AFF, "We met for a drink in a nice area of Paris, went to a nice restaurant, and then you know the rest." He later described his most unusual sexual encounter with a woman from AFF, "this girl wanted me to ring at the door and fuck her without saying a word for all the night." Xavier is a good representation of the majority of men interviewed, as most were looking for only short term, "no strings attached" sex partners or "friends with benefits" and pornographic material for masturbation on AFF.

Ryan also uses AFF as his primary dating site, but he is more geared to finding sex partners then finding a relationship, although he did state he would be "open to it" if a relationship occurred. During the interview with Ryan, he discusses that shortly after his divorce, his last relationship was with a woman from AFF in which he had a three-year live-in relationship. They became heavily involved in the swingers lifestyle and hosted parties at their home nearly every weekend, "recreationally." Ryan spoke about having as many as 12 couples partaking in-group sex at their home. He said the evening generally started with drinks and hors d'oeuvres and soon after sexual activities began. Generally one couple will begin to make out which seems to start a chain reaction. After hours of sharing each other's spouses, Ryan reports that the "best" sex occurs after the party when the couples go home and "make love" with their spouses. Since Ryan has been on AFF he has been with well over 120 sexual partners, the majority of them also members of AFF, most were swinging couples he met at swing parties and some he met individually after he got out of his three year relationship mentioned earlier.

Tim also uses AFF as his primary means of dating and has removed himself from other dating sites because he felt that AFF provided him what he needed in both his sexual and dating relationship goals. Tim not only uses the site to meet sexual and romantic interests but has also made a great deal of friends, both men and women with whom he has daily contact with



not only online but offline as well (in-person and on the phone). He has met the majority of people he calls friends through his involvement with AFF blogging groups and chat rooms. He has met several times in-person with people from his blogging group and has attended several "Meet and Greet" parties with members from the NYC chat room. "Meet and Greet" parties are usually non-sexual parties held in a public place like a lounge or bar where people from the chat rooms can meet and interact with each other in person. Tim met his current girlfriend at a "Meet and Greet" party whom is married and just in the process of getting a divorce. Tim claims to be in love with her and has been dating her for eight months. However, he still meets and has sex with other women from the site, especially if he is not able to meet with her. Tim claims that he has met "approximately 40-50 women from the site for sex."

Jim was also an interesting case in that he was a very shy, socially less skilled than the majority of men interviewed and had the least sexual experience than those interviewed of his age group. Jim told me during his interview that he had only two relationships with women in his lifetime and that he had not had a romantic female connection in his life for several years prior to becoming a member of AFF. He reported that he joined a blogging group on AFF and made many friendships there, which tended to be his major social outlet beyond school in the real world. During the time of the interview, he mentioned he was developing a close friendship with a married woman from the site that he had met in the blogging group. They spoke by phone and had phone sex several times since they met online. Jim seemed hopeful about this connection, but obviously did not want to get his hopes too much up if the relationship did not go anywhere. A couple weeks after the interview, Jim contacted me again and informed me that he and the woman he had made the connection with were now dating each other exclusively offline, while she is in the process of divorcing her husband.

While the men are making connections with women they meet from the website, the majority of them center around sex and in general are very short, yet very intense physical relationships that don't last past a few encounters at best,

With anonymity provided by the Internet, people may be more inclined to share intimate ideas, feelings and secrets that are normally reserved for a primary, long-term relationship. Such sharing may also be done at an accelerated pace compared to non-Internet relationships. In terms of convenience, an individual is able to find someone else with similar interests at any given time on the Internet (Parker and Wampler 416).

But exceptions are like that of Ryan, Tim and Jim who have met women from the site in which they had serious, lasting relationships and friendships. However, their relationships were built upon a sexual relationship first and romance second. For these men, this is ideal because then they feel their sexual interests are compatible with AFF women they have been involved with. Most of the divorced and married men interviewed claimed that their marriages were sexually stale and no longer satisfying. The participants also reported that their wives were not sexually explorative or open. Often, they felt they had to hide their sexual interests and desires from their wives. The reason why they felt that joining AFF would be beneficial to them was so they could find sexually open, exploratory, compatible women that they could have short and long term interpersonal relationships with. When I asked the interviewees how they categorized the people they had met on AFF, most of the men referred to their contacts as casual acquaintances and short term, "no strings attached" sexual partners. Also, as in the case with Ryan, many of the interviewees reported to also have more sexual partners after becoming members of AFF than they had prior, as well as, having more contact socially with the opposite sex.

These case studies show that the Internet seems to be having a definite impact on changing traditional notions of romance and dating, becoming in effect ever more de-ritualized because Internet relationships seem too often accelerate or even sometimes bypass the "getting to know you stage" that happens prior to establishing a physical connection.

### *Fantasies and Sexuality*

Fantasy fulfillment is one of the biggest draws to AFF for the men interviewed and for the general population of the website. AFF is a stand-alone, one-stop, fantasy shop for all members' online sexual needs. If you cannot find what you are looking for or do not speak the language, AFF has affiliate sites that can fulfill anyone's legal fantasy and in any language (i.e. ALT.com is one such site, dedicated to the Bondage, Domination and Sado-Masochism (BDSM) crowd that is heavily advertised with pop-ups on the AFF website). Most of all, AFF members can very often make fantasy a reality by online and offline interacting with other members of the site.

For the men interviewed, nearly all of them reported that being on AFF had indeed changed their sexual fantasies. All



interviewees, except one, also reported that their fantasies had increased since becoming members of the site, “. . . it has increased them for sure. . . usually when I masturbate, it was a lot about the release, but on AFF when I am watching a sexy woman on cam, it is more about arousal,” said Kyle. The majority of interviewees said that they were triggered to masturbate by something they had seen on AFF (pictures, live webcams and pornographic videos were all the main triggers) or actual interaction with other AFF members that often included cybersex. When asked if he masturbated and if it was triggered by interacting on the website Xavier said, “Yes a lot, like five to six times a day. . . yes AFF has triggered me a lot.”

The interviewees were also asked if there were things they wanted to try sexually that they had not tried or even thought before since becoming members of AFF. More than half of the interviewees answered yes to this question and listed various sex acts they wanted to try. The majority of the men wanted to try threesomes and group sex, especially sex with two women which was the most reoccurring fantasy that was brought up in the interviews, “Yes, all my modern fantasies are pretty much as a result of knowing that people are out there are actually into doing them. . . the whole two women thing,” George contributes.

For Ryan, AFF made real what he had only seen in pornography, before those sexual acts were something done in the movies and not by real people in real life. Since becoming a member, Ryan has turned his fantasies into reality, when asked the same question he replied, “Multiple partners. A lot of those things I only thought occurred in movies and not in real life. When I found AFF I really wanted to explore things and eventually found partners off AFF who did too.” Other acts that some of the interviewees wanted to experience and try included anal sex, bondage, spontaneous, blind meetings (where no identity or photos, names or even words are exchanged only sex occurs), new partners or bi-sexual experience. When asked if their ideas of sexuality had changed since becoming members of AFF, most all of the men said that they were more open to and had a greater understanding of how they and others express their sexuality, “most definitely. It’s opened my eyes and my comfortableness with my sexuality, that I am a sexual being. I enjoy sharing it with other people who are comfortable with theirs,” said Ryan.

Fantasies are one of the most important components to this study because they often provide the motivation and important insight to why the men interviewed become members of AFF. Their fantasies online have a real impact on their sexual behavior and preferences offline. These fantasies can often lead to compulsive behavior like spending several hours online, spending too much money on pornography or accessing adult sites like AFF or larger impacts that affect their interpersonal relationships offline. Whether the fantasy is harmful or helpful in the interviewees’ lives, AFF and the Internet at large provides an outlet for sexual expression and realization.

## Conclusion

The men interviewed use this site on a regular basis to satisfy most of their sexual needs, fulfill sexual fantasies and live out their desires while making connections with the opposite sex. Some of the men are able to make their fantasies a reality through the electronic gateway of AFF, but there seems to be little personal responsibility or self-reflection taking place in regard to their actions. The influence and theme of the AFF website seems to help justify their actions on and offline. It is just so easy for them to simply sit at their computers, in the comfort of their homes or offices, to find new sexual partners or alternative relationships, in between their regular busy real-life schedules, all at the click of a mouse. Little thought is given to the consequences of these types of relationships.

While the Internet has made it easier for them to come into contact with more people with similar interests in sex, it seems to have also given them the impression that these relationships are less complicated, require less effort to invest in and maintain. However, the evidence seems to suggest that these relationships are just as complicated as non-Internet based relationships, or even more so. The relationships being created by the interviewees of the study have the tendency to be based on a sexual connection first before an emotional connection is made which is the opposite from traditional non-Internet relationship building. These relationships are very often short-lived and intense in nature, and have little substance or common interests shared other than the sexual outcome. The men often categorize these relationships as “no strings attached” or “friends with benefits.” The people they meet and have sex with from AFF are not even considered lovers or romantic partners, references it seems that now are “old fashion,” traditional terms. The connotations of love and romance carry a heavier weight for them when they look for love interests on other regular dating sites like Match.com or meeting people offline in non-Internet relationships.

Since becoming members of AFF, interviewees tended to have more confidence, were more social and tended to have more sexual partners than they had prior to becoming members. However, there seems to be more ego-stroking received online than



any significant self-reflection. But in reality, that is why they go to the website in the first place because it alleviates them of having to think deeply about themselves, about sexuality or relationships. They are mainly there for instant sexual gratification than intellectual stimulation, although arguably that is where sex starts "cyberspace proves that sex is not between our legs but inside our heads, (Carvalhiera and Gomes 357)." There was, however, one of the men in the study whom the site had the most impact on his identity in which he reflected on. Jim's case was significant in this because not only had the site impacted his confidence level and esteem for the better, but through feedback from people within his blog group he was able to make significant life changes. He went back to school to become a paralegal and as reported before, he is now dating. Prior to being a member, Jim was warehouse worker making minimum wage, and a social shut-in. Although sex was the draw that brought Jim to the site, it was not his only focus for being there. He used the site to improve his social skills by socializing and intellectualizing with other members. Jim's case is mostly unique but it's indicative not only of the impact that sites can have on the socially disenfranchised, but it also seems to show that a one gets out of the experience what one puts into it. The impact seems to be dependent upon what the member is looking for in the first place. This study has shown that connections are being made by the interviewees and other members of AFF which are personally impacting not only how they see themselves, but also their sexual and dating behavior and creation of relationships that start online.

However, AFF has so many aspects to it that have implications on the psychological and social make up of its members that further studies are needed to understand the full impact it has on its members and what it contributes to the evolution of how human relationships are being formed and developed in the virtual world and how they translate to real life. In hindsight, looking at this website holistically proved to be a bigger task than had been originally anticipated, in the time span and manpower given to conduct the study. Future studies should perhaps have narrower focuses on certain aspects of the site, especially in regards to the women of AFF, birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. Studies should be more in-depth, and conducted over longer a longer period of time to collect more empirical, statistical data.

Looking back on this study I am reminded of a movie called "Logan's Run." In the movie there is a scene in which the hero, Logan, is in his living quarters and has a remote control in his hand. He points it at an opening on the wall and is able to "click" through holographic images of people who have put themselves onto a transporter network to find sexual partners that is reminiscent of the Internet. Logan sees a woman in the network he is interested in and "clicks" on her full-life holographic image, she then materializes and steps into his room, alive and real. I wonder if this is a view of what is to come, if the Internet will eventually evolve into successfully connecting the electronic and the physical world together in a seamless stream that blurs the lines between the virtual and real world.

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